

4 - 5 Air and Missile Defense Battalion supports Border Patrol in Arizona

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FORT BLISS, Texas - Detecting and responding to low flying aircraft used by transnational criminal organizations to transport illicit drugs across the U.S. – Mexico border is critical to the accomplishment of the U.S. Border Patrol, Tucson Sector's homeland security mission.

During a recently completed training mission conducted in Southern Arizona by E Battery, 4th Battalion, 5th Air and Missile Defense Regiment, 69th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, the U.S. Border Patrol's efforts to curtail the illegal activity was greatly enhanced with the support of the unit's Sentinel radar and Avenger air defense systems.

The Military Support to Civilian Law Enforcement Agencies mission, based on a request for the Department of Defense assistance submitted by the U.S. Border Patrol, was coordinated by Joint Task Force North. As an element of U.S. Northern Command, JTF North solicits volunteer active duty and reserve component units and personnel from all four DOD branches to perform military support operations requested by the Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security agencies.

During the mission, 4-5 AMD Soldiers employed their Sentinel radars, along with the visual surveillance capabilities of their Avenger air defense systems, nested with U.S Border Patrol surveillance systems, the Western Air Defense System, and Air Marine Operation Center, to identify and report the suspected illegal border crossings of low-flying aircraft to agents patrolling the Arizona – Sonora, Mexico border area," said Lt. Col. John Stahl, chief of JTF North's Southwest Regional Support Team.

"The air defense support increased the Border Patrol's ability to secure the homeland and provided the unit with a tremendous opportunity to train on their mission-essential tasks against a real adversary --- the transnational criminal organizations," said Stahl.

In accordance with the Posse Comitatus Act, military personnel on JTF North missions operate strictly in a support capacity. They cannot search, seize, detain, make arrests, nor assume law enforcement roles. The Soldiers of the "Renegade Battalion" limited their support activities to reporting the detected aircraft suspected of illegally entering U.S. airspace.

"The Border Patrol is always striving to find new ways to detect and interdict smugglers from entering the U.S. The [supporting] Soldiers serve as a force multiplier contributing to a better managed border by providing intelligence analysis and immediate support to our mission," said, Tucson Sector Border Patrol Chief Randy Hill.

"The Soldiers' presence allows our agents to respond more rapidly to any detected crossings thereby increasing our effectiveness," said Hill.

JTF North missions provide the volunteer units with unique real-world training opportunities that allow them to train on over 90 percent of the mission-essential tasks --- their wartime military duties. The JTF North support missions also allow the units to operate in civilian law enforcement interagency environments at the federal, state, and local levels.

"The opportunity to deploy our Sentinel and Avenger capabilities in this capacity facilitated for unparalleled training value. Executing daily emplacement of our organic equipment throughout the border region allowed us to focus on our core competencies as Short Range Air Defenders, while simultaneously offering enhanced situational awareness to the United States Border Patrol in tracking transnational threats," said E/4-5 AMD Battery Commander, Capt. Jonathan Hendershott.

In coordination with the JTF North mission planners and the U.S. Border Patrol military support coordinators, E/4-5 AMD planned the entire support operation and executed a complete unit deployment, mission execution, and redeployment. The Southwest border mission allowed the unit to train in an arid desert environment that is similar to what they would encounter during a deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Prior to their movement from Fort Hood to Arizona, all supporting personnel completed the JTF North required pre-mission training. Upon arrival at their mission site, they also received a series of mandatory mission startup briefings prior to the start of the support operations. The briefings included legal authorities training, which outlined what the Soldiers could and could not do during the mission.

"Working in conjunction with the United States Border Patrol and sharing the operational procedures of both agencies was definitely beneficial to the professional development for all parties involved," said Sgt. Jason Fields, Avenger Team Chief, E/4-5 AMD.

The interagency support mission was a total "Win-Win Situation" --- the U.S. Border Patrol received high technology support that helped them to detect and interdict illegal aircraft border crossings and the 4-5 AMD Soldiers netted real-world training opportunities that will help prepare them for future deployments